

## Algorithmic Domination

**Motivation:** To provide a unifying theoretical framework that describes and explains concerns about algorithmic governance (*descriptive desiderata*) and provides normative guidance about how to respond to those concerns (*normative desiderata*).

**Thesis:** The republican political concept of *domination* provides this unifying theoretical framework, particularly if the concept is understood to cover instances of *micro-domination*, *extractive domination*, and *constitutive domination*.

**Definition:** Domination = Asymmetrical power relation that pervades hierarchically organized societies. Often discussed in relation to freedom: to be free is to be free from domination (i.e. modal risk of arbitrary interference by the *dominus*) – Pettit/Skinner

### 1. Micro-domination (from Tom O’Shea ‘Disability and Domination’)

| What is it?   | Algorithmic Mechanism   |
|---|---|
| Many small-scale instances of domination (i.e. decisions in which a dominus defines a space of permissible activity) which seem trivial by themselves but aggregate into something serious. | Vast ecosystem of algorithmic choice architectures that we face on a daily basis; they define a space of permissible choices; if we step out of line we are sanctioned/disciplined (e.g. Vertesi’s pregnancy) |

### 2. Extractive Domination (from Michael Thompson ‘Two faces of domination...’)

| What is it?  | Algorithmic Mechanism  |
|--|--|
| <b>A</b> is in a structural relation with <b>B</b> whose purpose is to enable <b>A</b> to extract a surplus benefit from <b>B</b> . ‘Surplus benefit’ = benefit that would otherwise have gone to <b>B</b> or to the community | The infrastructure of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2015). Our online behaviours feed and are incentivized by systems that extract profit from our data. No/limited compensation for this; profit goes to digital monopolies. Worse than traditional capitalist-worker relation? |

### 3. Constitutive Domination (from Michael Thompson ‘Two faces of domination...’)

| What is it?   | Algorithmic Mechanism  |
|---|--|
| A system of norms and values that legitimizes the hierarchical and extractive social order. False Consciousness = The potential interference from the dominus seems non-arbitrary; acting outside the space of permissible activity starts to seem inconceivable. | <i>Attentional manipulation</i> – systems of surveillance capitalism capture and control our attention; <i>personalization and habituation</i> – the systems train and reward certain kinds of behaviour; <i>learned helplessness</i> – can’t have the algorithmically-mediated efficiency and convenience without compliance. |

**Conclusion:** Domination -- understood to include micro-domination, extractive domination and constitutive domination – describes the problem (‘names the enemy’) and provides normative guidance: need to create tools (legal, normative, technical) that dismantle and neutralize domination.

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## **Objections**

It's not really 'algorithmic' domination; algorithms are the tools by which humans dominate.

Micro-domination is 'concept creep' – it risks hypersensitivity to algorithmic convenience.

You overstate the extent of extractive dominance – there is some benefit to the individual and community; it is opt in.

You overstate the extent of constitutive domination – some degree of this is unavoidable

We already have remedies for the problems identified (e.g. GDPR).

## **Replies**